

### A dialogue on gays, straights, film, and the left

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The following dialogue condenses several letters exchanged between us during the evolution of this Special Section on "Gays and Film" and supplements it with excerpts from a taped discussion we had in Montreal in July. We thought it important to bring out some points the articles and reviews only briefly touched on in the Special Section.

TOM: (letter to Chuck, Feb. 1977) As you can see, and as I think I forewarned you, your suggested article on A VERY NATURAL THING has expanded considerably. I felt it would be apolitical to trash one gay film without semi-praising, or at least encouraging, two others at the same time. I also felt the four page introduction was an important part of the article even though it isn't about the films, for reasons you will see when you read it. If you like the film part and not the intro, we will have to talk about it. I'm particularly anxious to know if you think it sounds querulous, self-righteous, belligerent etc. ... The last issue looked great; the LIFEGUARD cover was a real turn-on. Real *Advocate* butch. I'm sure your sales skyrocketed.

CHUCK: (letter to Tom, Feb.) I'm sending your article around the editorial board, and we should have a decision in a month or so. It was terribly flattering to have your article come in with the introduction you wrote. Obviously you trust us, and that kind of comradely engagement is all too rare sometimes and something to treasure when it happens. I don't think the tone was wrong, though I can't speak for others on the ed. board. I think the intro sets the article and also is exactly the kind of ongoing process that JUMP CUT or any other decent political work has to be. We learn; we change.

In the area of general observations about the intro. I think that you single out Peter whereas I am at least as culpable. I thought about the particular headline of his article for a bit of time and changed my mind

several times about printing it or not. I finally decided that the irony of the stereotypes was heavy enough to anyone who read the article to make it clear Peter was critical of the stereotypes. That's not a justification (I agree with your criticisms) but an explanation. But, of course, the reader never knows what went on in the editor's head. In short, we would have, having made the mistake, been absolutely ready to print any (or any number of) outraged replies... That is, our consciousness was that high (though not high enough to avoid the mistaken headline to start with).

There is a certain vicious circle effect here. Even if you keep using little formulas like we do in a lot of our editorials and our advertising such as, "Jump Cut recognizes the struggles of workers, women, third world people, gays and lesbians," that still doesn't connect up with reality — people don't always realize that we're desperately trying to get material. But, why should a gay write for JC, which hasn't published anything by or on gays, etc.? So, the articles don't come in, so you don't print them, etc.. I think we're breaking through that now (though our track record on racism is a lot worse than on sexism... failure to consider it a priority, inertia, etc.).

I would make one criticism of your intro (though I don't mean by this that you should change it), which is that I think in pointing out that gay men are not by definition women haters, you avoid the problem that some are and that it is no more tolerable or justifiable than when found in straight men. Perhaps it's more noticeable (being less "natural" than routine sexism against women) by often being a ghettoized cultural expression of defensive responses to oppression. I have a hard time dealing with that when it pops up among men I know. Ageism is a similar thing in some parts of the gay culture that I'm critical of.

I talked with John Hess on the phone. Since we also have an article on the image of gays in film noir by Richard Dyer in England, we thought of printing the two articles together perhaps with the review you sent on of the Fassbinder film from *Gay Left*. What do you think of that? We could even make it a Special Section. Do you have any other leads on articles? ... Of course the real solution is to get all those gay left film people who haven't been writing to start sending us manuscripts. I'm thinking of keeping the Section to gay men. I don't like the idea of sticking in a lesbian writer just for the token value. And because lesbian criticism is very close to feminist criticism, it makes sense to separate gay male and female views, as individuals and organizations in fact have.

TOM: (letter) A possible section on gays and film is a great idea and I'll do anything I can to help out. Here are some possible articles and reprints. ...

I certainly agree that ageism and misogyny are no more tolerable in gay culture than in the dominant culture, and it's interesting that you find it

more "noticeable" in gay culture for the reasons you mention. However, I still don't feel obligated to do a heavy mea culpa number about it for a straight public. I think these problematic elements in gay culture are simply echoes of the same thing, institutionalized and omnipresent, in the dominant culture, and unpoliticized gays can't be held accountable for them any more than can blacks or other minorities. We have no choice since we live within a certain society but to use the cultural and political environment of that society as the raw material for our cultural expression. Until you can show me that BLUEBOY is demonstrably more sexist and ageist than PLAYBOY, I've got other things on my mind. In any case, thank you for your candor, your sensitivity, and your trust in return.

## TAPE EXCERPTS

CHUCK: I'm enthusiastic about the Special Section because it's important for JC to get involved in developing gay criticism and fighting sexism within the left. As you point out in your article, some parts of the left have a totally reactionary attitude and dismiss or attack gays as "decadent." We have to struggle against that and fight for gay liberation as part of a total left perspective and program. Today you can't call yourself a leftist and not take into account the struggle against sexism by women's, lesbian, and gay liberation — just as you must deal with racism. Right now in the left, at least in the United States, there's a lot of liberalism in the left about gay issues. People will just pay lip service and say, "Yes, that's important," but not go any further. Hopefully the Special Section is a starting point for straight people to see what a gay film criticism is and see how they can incorporate it into their own criticism and teaching.

TOM: It's only in the last ten years that the left has reevaluated its attitude towards women. Similarly, until now, the left's attitude toward gays has reproduced the attitudes of the dominant institutions in the most retrogressive ways. For that reason, most gay leftists have more or less dissociated themselves from the left movement and worked only in the gay movement, often abandoning the left after years of scrapping and humiliation. Leftists at best often see the gay struggle as a civil rights struggle and nothing more, and they fail to see the connection between the oppression of gays and that of women and minorities and the working class.

CHUCK: It's often very hard for any of us to understand the systematic nature of our oppression. ... That it is understandable only as a system and not just as what happens to us as individuals. Both gay and straight men have to understand sexism, as a system of oppression, as part of patriarchal capitalist society, not just in terms of how it affects them psychologically or materially but also how it affects women. I'm critical of the film MEN'S LIVES (see review and interview, JC 10/11) for not

making that connection. While it's very good at showing the surface level oppression of men, it never connects that to the operation of sexism within our whole capitalist culture. It fails to see that all men benefit from the oppression of women, whether they want to or not. We need to move to a much more comprehensive analysis and political action. Straight men have to be active in fighting in the interests of gay men; and both gay and straight men have to understand and fight against the oppression of women. And all of us have a stake in replacing capitalism with socialism. Whatever our immediate priorities, we have to realize we're fighting a whole system of exploitation.

In examining my own attitudes, I realize that in the past few years I've tended to think of gays in terms of those who are able to live a relatively open gay lifestyle in several hip professional areas in Chicago. Because those men are "visible," I've tended to think of gay issues more in terms of lifestyle and also to assume that indeed there has been a gradual improvement in the situation — that gays are accepted, or at least tolerated. I remember saying that about a year ago to John Hess and he strongly disagreed. At the time he was teaching a course called "Men's Lives," learning a lot himself, and was more sensitive to gay oppression than I was. Now with the Anita Bryant campaign against gays, I've had to see that was a pretty superficial attitude. I was really wrong. The depth of the problem is more apparent. From what I've seen in Chicago, I think gays and straights who'd counted on gradual reform are rethinking their politics.

TOM: There was a lot of illusory "progress" in the early 70s. What really happened was not so much a liberalization of social attitudes, but an accelerated ghettoization of the gay community in large urban areas where there was a kind of anonymity and defense in numbers. These were ghettos with a definite economic and cultural vitality, which led to a false sense of well-being, a kind of complacency on the part of middle-class, unpoliticized gays. People failed to see that the gay community extended far beyond those ghettos and that the liberation of the ghetto was every bit as tenuous as the security of the closet. You're right that Bryant has really shown us how premature the euphoria of "ghetto liberation" really was.

Movies made in the atmosphere of so-called liberation might have shown us the same thing: that the new hip tolerance was really a new form of homophobia. I get the feeling that Hollywood and European filmmakers who openly and frankly portray gays really think they're liberated. It's as if the new frankness about rape in a film like LIPSTICK actually made that film a progressive one. Or as if the brazen effrontery it took to make all of the villains in THE DEEP black indicated a progressive attitude towards race. It's incredible how popular films like SCARECROW, SLAPSHOT, FUNNY LADY, CROSS OF IRON, THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH, etc., BARRY LYNDON, instead of being

liberal in their use of gay characters, actually perpetuate the most vicious of stereotypes.

Look at SLAPSHOT. The movie comes across as hip, realistic, and liberal because of all the frank homophobic language in the script and the introduction of a sensitive lesbian character (actually an insidious stereotype — all she needed was to be satisfied in bed by Paul Newman). But the anti-gay language of the hockey players, which the scriptwriter probably thought would be taken ironically, as signs of macho sexual fear or whatever, actually caters to homophobia. Audiences lap it up. They think it's cute and original to be able to queerbait openly and without guilt. When Paul Newman tells a widowed businesswoman that she better toughen up her preteen son or else she'll find him with a cock in his mouth, one of the oldest stereotypes in the book is confirmed and legitimized because it's said by hip, liberal Paul Newman.

CHUCK: I think there's a similar danger within the left, within JUMP CUT, that we'd run this Special Section on gays and then congratulate ourselves and in effect ghettoize gays by either stopping at that point or saying, "Well, now we have some people who will write about gay films and we'll run them from time to time," rather than really dealing with issues of sexism and gay struggles in all of our criticism. It would reproduce the way men have sometimes dealt with the women's movement, saying, "Well, we'll have a women's page," or letting women write feminist criticism and acting as if that absolves men from dealing with their own sexism or with sexism in the films they make, write about, or teach.

TOM: You're right that it's a dangerous kind of tokenism, but film culture hasn't even gotten to the stage of tokenism yet. There are all kinds of areas which should be impossible to discuss without dealing with the gay question. But it's never dealt with; it's politely ignored.

I'm not talking only of films like DOG DAY AFTERNOON, where the subject is obvious. But I mean those areas where a gay reference is obviously suppressed or visible just below the surface — male buddy films, for example, and most male action genres. I'm not saying such films have consciously touched on any truths about homosexual components of male-to-male relationships, but the fear of such truths is usually clearly articulated; those films show the repression of such truths, whatever the truths may be.

Another area where the gay question is a crucial one but is always suppressed is that whole stream of European cinema which expresses a kind of "decadent" or androgynous sensibility, regardless of whether it deals explicitly with gayness. I'm thinking of the Italians, of course — Fellini, Bertolucci, Visconti, Zeffirelli, Pasolini, but also of Fassbinder, Daniel Schmid, Losey, Ken Russell, Jansco, Roeg, etc., etc. ... Gayness is never raised in criticism of those films, leftist or otherwise. The fact, for

example, that THE CONFORMIST is positing some vague and ambiguous connection between fascism and homosexuality is never interrogated in any criticism of Bertolucci that I've seen.

The erotic cinema and pornography are another area where the gay perspective is suppressed. I thought it was shocking when *Cineaste* ran their survey on "Pornography and the Left," that they invited comments from five or six "authorities" but it never occurred to them to ask an openly gay person for his or her opinion. Particularly since the gay pornography industry is such a huge one and pornography has had such a formative influence on gay culture, a progressive influence even, according to many people.

CHUCK: In what sense?

TOM: Before the days of an openly visible gay movement, the only way for many gay people to discover and explore their own homosexuality was through pornography. That's how they recognized certain things about themselves, about their own bodies, that there were other people out there like themselves, that they were not alone. ... It was so typical of leftist cultural attitudes for *Cineaste* to have this glaring omission in their "comprehensive" treatment of the issue of pornography. I think the feminist attitude to pornography is often quite different from the gay male one. That's something lesbians and gay men are usually aware of but avoid bringing up in the interest of unity.

With a few important exceptions, I think that gay men are almost always opposed to any form of censorship, because they remember what it was like in the closet. And they know that censorship will always be applied to their own legitimate cultural expression as soon as it's permitted anywhere. That's what's happening in New York right now: No sooner does the *New York Times* make its hypocritical, puritanical decision to refuse advertising for porno films than they take it upon themselves as well to decide what gay cultural manifestations are decent enough to be advertised in a family newspaper, refusing to run an ad for a gay theatrical piece called *Gulp* with no pornographic content whatsoever because somebody didn't like the title. It's the same with the Canadian government's decision to block the import of a gay sex manual while admitting a real flood of the comparable hetero manual, *The Joy of Sex*, or the U.S. prison system's refusal to allow gay prisoners to receive gay publications. The issue of censorship is far from closed.

CHUCK: Another aspect of the liberalism that I talked of before can manifest itself in straight men accepting gay men or gay film criticism but without learning what gay men have to say to them as men. I think straights can often be passive and smug about it. But they should become more active in learning about gay liberation. What do you think straight men should do, what should they read, to find out more, to become more active in coming to terms with their own sexism and

fighting it?

TOM: Rather than telling straight men what they should or should not do, I think I'd rather say how important it is for gays within the left to come out and form a very visible and vocal presence within both the straight left and the unpoliticized gay movement. It's up to straight men to choose their own methods of self-criticism and activism. As for reading, here are some suggestions.

## A SHORT READING LIST ON THE GAY (MALE) LIBERATION MOVEMENT AND THE LEFT

### 1. Books

- James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany*. New York: Arno Press, 1975;
- John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935)*. Times Change Press, 62 W. 14th St., NY NY 10011.

These are two pioneering, mutually complementary studies of the forebears of the gay liberation movement, both with a consistently materialist outlook. The latter contains material from Britain and the Soviet Union as well as Germany.

- Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* New York: Crowell, 1976.

A staggering documentary record of 410 years of oppression — and of resistance and love. Refreshing for its non-academic approach, and particularly interesting in its probing of the socialist roots of the early American gay movement during the McCarthy era.

### 2. Pamphlets

- Don Milligan, *The Politics of Homosexuality*. Pluto Press, Unit 10, Spencer Court, 7 Chalcot Road, London NW1 8LH, 1973.

A useful work suggesting how the oppression of gays supports the system and proposing some remedies.

- Bob McCubbin, *The Gay Question*. World View Publications, 46 U. 21st St., NY, NY.

A good introduction for straight leftists, published by Youth Against War and Fascism. Starts with Engels.

- David Thorstad, *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from*

Selected, introduced, and with commentary by Thorstad, ex-member of the SWP (he resigns in disgust at the end of the chronology represented by the documents) and guiding light of the Gay Activists' Alliance, New York City. Available from 316 E. 11th St., NY, NY.

- *The Political Perspective of the Lavender and Red Union.*

A manifesto and analysis by this active group which has recently reconsidered its exclusively gay orientation. If not still available from the Lavender and Red Union, 6618 Sunset Blvd., LA 90028, your local gay bookstore might still have it in stock.

- *Toward a Scientific Analysis of the Gay Question.* The Los Angeles Research Group, PO Box 1362, Cudahy, CA 90201.

A group of lesbian communists (or communist lesbians?) proposing a provocative analysis of homophobia on the left.

- "A Conference Report: Faggots and Class Struggle."

A special issue of *Morning Due: A Journal of Men Against Sexism*, 2:6 (Nov.-Dec. 1976). P.O. Box 22228, Seattle, WA 98122.

- Sheila Rowbotham and Jeffrey Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life: The Personal and Sexual Politics of Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis*. London, Pluto Press.

An interesting study of two pioneer sexual liberationists of turn-of-the century England, one gay and the other possibly.